

John Kennedy Was My President

By Harvey Aronson

IF JOHN F. KENNEDY were alive today, he would be 71 years old and that is almost impossible for me to deal with. To me, he is forever young.

I showed a colleague a story I wrote about John Kennedy's assassination — about the hush of shame that covered Dallas the day a 24-year-old bookbinder who had never been anybody shot the president of the United States — and my co-worker said it was strange to know that I had been there. "I was 9 years old," he said. "This is history to me." Then he called over someone else. "Look at this," he said.

I never thought about John Kennedy as history. I voted for him in triumph and wrote about him in sadness and in death. I loved John Kennedy. And so maybe that is what this is — a love story by someone who mourns for a lost America in a country where social welfare is anathema and "liberal" is a dirty word. Someone who longs for a New Frontier that was barely explored and for a promise that once sparkled in a president's smile.

I do not care which or how many movie stars Jack Kennedy was involved with; I never believed in Sir Galahad but I liked Sir Lancelot as a human being. I do care about the way it was on a day in 1960 when I first saw John Kennedy. He came to a Quonset arena in Commack in a swirl of straw campaign hats and hot jazz and talked about what he could do for his country. I saw him standing on a stage with tomorrow in front of him. I heard him sound a call to personal dignity and civil rights. I watched him sound a drumbeat we could all march to — the cadence of a changing world and the hope that we could make it better. The message of a New Frontier that he had spelled out when he accepted the Democratic nomination — "a frontier

of unknown opportunities and perils . . . a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats." A frontier that was a set of challenges in an age in which "we will witness not only new breakthroughs in weapons of destruction — but also a race for mastery of the sky and the rain, the ocean and the tides, the far side of space and the inside of men's minds."

I heard the sheer, wonderful surge of eloquence. I watched the Boston-accented "a" spreading passion across the stands, and I was part of it. We were all part of it. And I thought that if my country could produce candidates like John Kennedy, it had to be a terrific country. That was his talent. That was how he made you feel.

'I saw him standing on a stage with tomorrow in front of him.'

Don't tell me that he was too ruthless and that his father was a rich autocrat and that John Kennedy never really got anything done. That's bilge and blathering and the carping of people not fit to sit in his rocking chair. He was a political candidate who preserved the division between church and state. He was a war hero and the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book. He was the candidate who called Coretta King as soon as he learned her husband had been arrested for sitting in at a table in an Atlanta restaurant. He was the president who fought for Medicare and whose administration introduced the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Jack Kennedy could never have gone to Bitburg to eulogize the Nazi war dead, but he went to Berlin and visited Checkpoint Charlie and passed a stretch of weeds above what was once Adolf Hitler's bomb shelter. And he talked about freedom in a divided city in a country branded with guilt and said that "when one man is enslaved, who are free?" And he said that as a free man he took pride in the words "Ich bin ein Berliner" and the world cheered.

No one in our time ever combined so much style with so much substance. In Vienna, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev explained that he was wearing the Lenin Peace Medal and John Kennedy leveled him with a one-liner. "I hope you do nothing to make them take it away from you," he said.

He was funny and witty and urbane, and he was the president who played touch football and looked equally real in sweaters and tuxedos and invited Igor Stravinsky to the White House. He was a human being and susceptible to life. Maybe that was what stalked the time in America they called Camelot — that it was almost too good. Three years after that day in Commack, I stood by the window of a Boston hospital and watched John Kennedy walk with his head bowed in a terrace of the building where his newborn son was dying. In memory, the light of that August day was dying, too.

And then I went to Dallas and read the shame of the city in lonely footfalls on Main Street, in a funeral wreath hanging on the closed door of a honky-tonk bar. It was Friday night but it could have been a lonely Sunday. John F. Kennedy was dead. It wasn't very professional but I walked the streets of Dallas with tears running down my face. I told you. I loved John Kennedy. When he died, it was like the death of first love or the end of childhood. Things would never be the same again.

He was my last hero. He was our last hero. He made us feel America, he understood the city lights below the whispering jets and the squares of the farm fields and the patterns of the conquering suburbs. He gave expression to the fires that burn in the hearts of the striving, to the dreams that keep little pieces of us forever young.

He was my president. His death made me think about my own mortality. He was my time, my generation, my aspiration. I believed in the New Frontier as I have never been able to believe in the Great Society or any of the imitations that came afterward. Because with John Kennedy, there was the hope of all the things he was yet to accomplish. He had a talent for the future.



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